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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2016  
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SUBJECT: EAP DAS JOHN'S MEETING WITH FM NITYA

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Thai Foreign Minister Nitya Phibulsongram told visiting EAP DAS Eric John and the Ambassador on October 24 that the interim government is resolutely moving toward the restoration of parliamentary democracy. In response to DAS John's strong expression of concern over the continued imposition of martial law, Nitya stated that "specific reasons" were preventing martial law from being lifted, but the issue is being reviewed day by day. In a short drop-by, Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont said that he is trying to lift martial law "as soon as possible." Nitya provided a brief update on Surayud's travel to ASEAN countries. End Summary.

"AN UNPRECEDENTED SITUATION"

¶2. (C) FM Nitya began the meeting by emphasizing that the interim government's top priority is the restoration of parliamentary democracy. "We are resolutely moving towards such." According to Nitya, PM Surayud had reiterated to the cabinet today his desire to "get work done and get out of here (i.e., relinquish office)." As evidence of progress, Nitya cited the selection of the National Legislative Assembly, the withdrawal of troops from the streets and television stations, and movement toward a constitution drafting body. Overall, Nitya characterized the situation of a military junta moving quickly to restore democracy as "unique," with no historical precedent.

¶3. (C) DAS John responded that the U.S. and Thailand remain strong allies and friends, and, as such, share the same goal of a democratically elected government. John emphasized that there is strong concern in Washington over the continued imposition of martial law. Bangkok appears to be calm. Why the need for martial law?

¶4. (C) According to Nitya, the government has specific--but unexplained--reasons for maintaining martial law. "Most people do not know about (these reasons.)" Security officials and government leaders are consulting every day on this issue, but are taking it "one day at a time." Nitya hopes that martial law can be lifted soon and that the overall

timetable for a return to democracy can be accelerated. That said, "when we do have elections they will be free and fair, as opposed to free and not fair."

15. (C) When pressed on the reasons behind martial law, Nitya was not forthcoming. DAS John stressed that, besides martial law, a subset of issues, such as restrictions on political liberties are also of concern. Nitya sidestepped this point as well, explaining that the interim government is actively reaching out to Thai political parties, who are already engaged in limited planning for the next election.

PM DROPS BY  
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16. (C) Near the end of the meeting, Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont dropped by briefly. Surayud noted that he didn't volunteer for this job, but "somehow got it." After listening to Nitya's recap of the discussion so far, the PM stated that he had just spoken with Army Chief and CNS leader Sonthi Boonyaratglin about lifting martial law. "We are proceeding in that direction" and trying to lift martial law "as soon as possible." Surayud is not sure about the exact timing, but acknowledged Washington and other international concern and stated that he will "try my best in the shortest possible time." DAS John again pressed for the lifting of martial law at the earliest possible date.

SURAYUD'S TRAVELS AND THE SOUTH  
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17. (C) Nitya provided a brief rundown on the Prime Minister's recent visits to ASEAN capitals. The PM's trips to Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Manila went well. Several of these

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meetings involved discussions of Thailand's restive southern provinces. President Macapagal-Arroyo offered to compare notes on the Philippine government's efforts in Mindanao. Meetings with Badawi in Kuala Lumpur likewise focused on improved security cooperation. According to Nitya, the Malaysian PM was "very forthcoming." Surayud's interim government is trying to keep the violence in the South contained as an internal issue; no one wants to internationalize it," but everyone realizes that Malaysian cooperation will be key to any solution.

18. (C) After political stability, Nitya says that the South is the government's second priority. Nitya has high hopes that a new administrative center in the South (Note: a reference to the recent reinstitution of the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center. End Note), along with a renewed appreciation for the cultural and religious issues at work, will lead to progress.

COMMENT  
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19. (C) Nitya, an experienced, Western-educated Thai diplomat, has been charged with putting the best possible spin on the actions of the coup makers and the interim government and has held several briefings for the diplomatic corps towards this end. Nitya's attempt to avoid getting pinned down on the question of lifting martial law will be examined in septel. We were slightly more encouraged by PM Surayud's forthright acknowledgment that martial law is creating a black eye for the interim government in the eyes of the international community, and that he intends to do something about it.  
BOYCE